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Intelligence Memorandum

Political Developments in Phnom Penh

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
26 October 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Political Developments in Phnom Penh

Summary

Cambodia is now going through a period of political unrest as a consequence of Prime Minister Lon Nol's actions with respect to the National Assembly and the government's civilian critics. The odds are good that the government will be able to cope with the grumblings of the politicians, Buddhists, and students who have interpreted the transformation of the assembly into a constituent assembly, the imposing of press censorship, and Lon Nol's speech of 20 October as evidence that the government is moving toward Sihanouk-style authoritarian rule. At the present time it seems unlikely that opposition elements will press their grievances beyond limits which the government can handle with a minimum of force or difficulty. Even under the worst of circumstances, Lon Nol probably can depend on the support of the army to keep his opponents in line.

The steps the government has taken should make it easier to impose the economic reforms and other measures that it deems necessary in a wartime situation. The government will almost certainly have to

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pay a political price for the advantage of ruling by decree. Its standing in the country has already been damaged by the fact that some Buddhists have publicly taken issue with its policies. In addition, there is a danger that other government supporters among the political elite, including the students, may become more disenchanted over the direction in which Lon Nol and his associates appear to be headed. The negative impact of the recent decisions may be mitigated, if Lon Nol makes some gesture as he has in the past, to placate and reassure those who want less, not more, authoritarian government.

The political situation in Cambodia is inherently fragile and any prolonged unrest runs the risk of getting out of hand. In addition, Lon Nol's recent decisions may have the effect of increasing the government's dependency on the military establishment. The military's loyalties are centered on Lon Nol himself, and beyond that its politics are largely unknown. Political stability, therefore, appears to rest more heavily than ever on Lon Nol's shoulders.

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1. The events in Phnom Penh over the past several weeks are further manifestations of struggle that has permeated Cambodian politics since March 1970. In simplified terms, the struggle is between those who viewed Sihanouk's overthrow as only the first step in the transformation of Cambodia's socio-political order and those whose interest in fundamental change was minimal. The state of political sophistication and ideological awareness among the various principals in Phnom Penh is such that the battle lines have never been clearly or permanently drawn. Many important figures have been fence-sitters or only dimly aware of the political equities at stake, while others, including Lon Nol, have switched sides at different times or on specific points of contention.

2. The remarkable political strength of the Lon Nol government in the early months of its existence, when the Communists' military threat was at its greatest, rested on the support that it commanded from the disparate groups that either helped to effect or legitimized Sihanouk's downfall. In view of the different political and personal interests at play, it was inevitable that the consensus would begin to fade once the euphoria of ending Sihanouk's 15 years of rule had dissipated and hard problems had to be confronted. The war accelerated this process by making demands on the government that could be met only by making the government less representative and decision-making more authoritarian.

3. The war also changed the context of the struggle in a crucial and, for Cambodia, unique way by thrusting the army for the first time into a prominent position in national politics. The growth in the army's political influence has not been directly proportional to its growth in size or its importance to the country's well being, but the Lon Nol regime has come more and more to be associated with military interests. The civilian "reformists"--students, assembly politicians, and evidently even some Buddhist bonzes--were the first to perceive the

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new role that the army was assuming and, more importantly, the direction in which events were driving the country. The political division between the civilian reformists and the military establishment is not fundamental and many civilians, including Sirik Matak and prominent bureaucrats, support the government and the status quo, while some military men would probably align themselves with the reformists. It would be a gross overstatement to suggest that the Cambodian Army has evolved to a point where it has an institutional outlook or interests and prerogatives that are clearly definable, much less that these are critical factors in the political equation in Phnom Penh. Nonetheless, with the notable exception of Sirik Matak, all of Lon Nol's key advisers are military men, and naturally their principal interests are in fighting the war effectively, even if that can only be done at the expense of some of the concepts that caused many Cambodians to support the regime that displaced Sihanouk.

4. It was in such a context that the assembly's future became a pivotal political problem. The government stood on one side, its critics on another with a number of civilian leaders--such as Son Ngoc Thanh--perched uncomfortably somewhere in the middle. The assembly issue was one of those infrequent instances when a decision of considerable importance could not be deferred or easily rendered less momentous. Whether out of design or ineptitude, Lon Nol's and Sirik Matak's actions ensured that the reconstitution of the assembly would be regarded everywhere as a major turning point. Indeed, in his unusually candid speech of 20 October, Lon Nol made it crystal clear that the action against the assembly was a critical turning point for the country.

5. In retrospect, the fate of the assembly was probably sealed when Sirik Matak and Lon Nol decided to fire the energetic and popular minister of interior In Tam. Among his other transgressions, his apparent effort to build an independent source of

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power in the countryside was the most serious. In Tam also got himself in political hot water when he urged that police power be taken from the army and returned to his ministry. The dismissal of In Tam now appears to have been part of a wider ranging attack on the regime's civilian critics. It was almost certainly taken in reaction to the rising criticism of the regime. Elements of the Cambodian press had gone so far as to draw indirect but unmistakable analogies between Lon Nol and Sihanouk. The National Assembly showed an increased tendency to question the government's programs. Efforts to work with the legislature proved unsuccessful, the assembly being as much at fault as the government. Evidently Lon Nol and Sirik Matak became convinced that tougher measures were necessary and perhaps unavoidable.

6. Had it not been for the intervention of Ambassador Swank, who suggested to Lon Nol and Sirik Matak that the dismissal of the assembly might do harm to the regime's international standing, the government might not have conceived the idea of turning the assembly into a constituent body charged with formulating a new constitution. This was a clever ploy for it disarmed the government's critics and at the same time enabled it to get rid of a disputatious and caviling legislative body which constitutionally had the power to bring down the government.

7. Vague promises about elections once the constitution was promulgated coupled with a conciliatory attitude might have carried the government through with a minimum of difficulty. But the government's tactics suggest that it was anxious to bring the civilian politicians to heel. It is not clear how closely Lon Nol or Sirik Matak were orchestrating the government's moves, and it may be that overzealous military officers were responsible for the threats against the lives of assembly delegates and the rumors of military tribunals that circulated in Phnom Penh before and after the decision was made on the fate of the assembly. These threats and rumors did undermine the efforts of In Tam and assembly president Yem Sambaur to rally assembly opposition to the

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government./ The threats also drove home the point that the government was playing a different, and from the point of view of the oppositionists, perhaps a decisive game.

8. Whatever his own responsibility for the intimidation of his opponents, Lon Nol certainly made no effort to dispel the notion that Cambodian political life had come to an important turning point. He said as much in his speech on 20 October. In addition to references to the deficiency of democracy, which were seized upon by the US press, the short speech contained a sharp warning about measures to be taken against "fifth columnists." The message could scarcely have been lost on political figures who lived through the Sihanouk era, nor could they misread the signs that political power was now coming to reside increasingly with the military. Under the rubric of the general mobilization order, press censorship was to be imposed and offenders were to be subject to military tribunals. Lon Nol also brought the first career military man into the cabinet, selecting General Thappana Nginn to replace In Tam as head of the sensitive Interior Ministry.

The Opposition

9. If they did not have doubts before, politically conscious Cambodians must now be asking themselves what was gained by the overthrow of Sihanouk. Some, like assembly delegate Douc Rasy, are congenital oppositionists, and their disenchantment with the regime will be of little real consequence. But the initial reaction in Phnom Penh to the government's action indicates that Lon Nol has also alienated civilian elements who were once firmly in his camp. Among the most important are In Tam and Son Ngoc Thanh. In Tam's rapid shift from a leading figure in the government to the opposition is a particularly important development because his considerable organizational talents are lost to the government. In addition, In Tam is one of the few civilian politicians who might conceivably have the courage and the

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talent to provide leadership for the otherwise disorganized and fragmented opposition. The loss of Son Ngoc Thanh's support would be important for the same reasons. Thanh, one of the few well-known figures in Cambodia, has connections with the Buddhist establishment and student elements. He also has a reputation for honesty. Moreover, because of his longstanding connection with the Khmer Krom military contingent, Thanh is the only civilian politician who might be in a position to command the loyalty of army troops. He strongly opposed the transformation of the National Assembly and accompanied Buddhist leaders when they subsequently made representations to Lon Nol. But Thanh's support is not yet lost to the government, and it seems likely that Lon Nol will make some gesture to keep him from going over to the opposition.

10. The most surprising development in the current situation was the Buddhist demonstration against the assembly transformation on 20 October. The Buddhists had been among the regime's strongest supporters, and the demonstrations indicate that at least some Buddhist leaders have either become disenchanted with the regime or are serving notice that they are displeased with the drift of events. The Buddhist clergy is perhaps the most influential element in Cambodian society. Monks are found in almost every sizable village in the countryside. In addition to their religious responsibilities, they often act as teachers in rural areas. Sihanouk, while paying due respect and attention to the clergy, made sure that the pagodas remained apolitical. Once he was ousted, however, Lon Nol lost little time in lining up Buddhist leaders to preach in behalf of his government and its policies. The fact that Lon Nol is deeply religious has strengthened his relationship with the Buddhists and made them more amenable to supporting him.

11. There are important theological differences within the Buddhist community in Cambodia which will probably limit its ability to act as a cohesive political force. Lon Nol enjoys the backing of the

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larger of the country's two sects, the Mohannikay. The smaller sect, the Thommayut, is less active politically and suffers from its former monarchist connection. Both Cheng Heng and Sirik Matak have the political misfortune to be members of this sect, and this probably makes it easier for the Mohannikay Buddhists to push for Cheng Heng's dismissal as a means of registering their displeasure with the government's recent actions.

12. The government's standing in the country has already been damaged by the fact that some Buddhists have publicly taken issue with its policies. The impact will not be very great, however, unless the Buddhists persist in their opposition and are joined by other groups. One possibility is that student elements will join with the Buddhist dissenters. There are reports that the Buddhists are seeking student support.

13. Thus far, there have been only slight rumblings of discontent within youth and student circles over the assembly issue. The somewhat amorphous student community, which also includes influential teachers and members of the intelligentsia, has much potential and some past experience in creating political trouble. Although student organizations in Phnom Penh tend to be highly fractionalized, the students as a whole are in strong agreement on the need to eliminate the corruption and inefficiency of many politicians from the Sihanouk era who have been carried over.

14. Lon Nol and Sirik Matak evidently recognized the youths' desire for change and for cleansing Cambodian society, and the enthusiastic student support that they commanded in the uncertain days following Sihanouk's deposition was one of the new leaders' most important political assets. Over the past year, the government has been able to keep the youth and students relatively content by declaring the republic and by taking a few young men into the cabinet. But

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the students' great expectations of sweeping reforms--however ill-defined and impractical they may be--are still unfulfilled, and there are some who show signs of cynicism and impatience over the regime's performance.

15. At the present time it seems highly unlikely that the civilian politicians, the Buddhists, or the students will be pressing their grievances beyond limits which the government can handle with a minimum of difficulty. Even under the worst of circumstances, it seems likely that Lon Nol can depend on the support of the army to keep his opponents in line. Unless Lon Nol is acting with more single-mindedness than he has shown in the past, or unless the atmosphere in Phnom Penh is a good deal more charged than now appears to be the case, there is a good chance that some face-saving means will be found to paper over the current difficulties. This may involve some changes in government personnel or perhaps some tangible reassurances from Lon Nol that the government is still committed to the "revolution." Lon Nol pledged again in his speech on 20 October that a new constitution would be forthcoming soon. He may take some steps to mediate the differences over the current draft. There are limits, of course, to how far Lon Nol will go. Although a new constitution presumably will authorize the formation of political parties and will provide for elections, Lon Nol and other top leaders have made it clear that it may be some time before security conditions in the countryside have improved to the extent that elections can be held. Moreover, having just scuttled the National Assembly, Lon Nol probably would not be eager to see a new legislature voted into office.

16. The current political infighting in Phnom Penh is not likely to degenerate into a major political crisis, and there seems to be no immediate threat to the short-term stability of the Lon Nol government. It will probably affect the nature of Cambodian politics in several ways, however, and the accumulated impact will be to make the regime more vulnerable than it has theretofore been. For one thing, the loss of political elan will place more pressure on the government to show real progress on the military

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and economic fronts in order to retain public confidence and to preserve a sense of national unity. Unfortunately, such progress depends heavily on how much military force the Communists decide to exert. Aware of the capital's disturbed political climate, the Communists could decide to abandon the relatively low military profile they have kept over the past six months and shift to a more aggressive stance during the dry season.

17. One imponderable in the equation is the army. Military officers have been playing larger roles since Sihanouk's fall, and the drift of events is in the direction of greater power for the army and its leaders over the coming months. The army is still politically weak, fragmented, and inexperienced. In the Sihanouk era, military officers--like the Buddhists--were enjoined from engaging in politics. The army did not play a central role in ousting Sihanouk. It is difficult to tell, therefore, where many of the key army officers stand politically or which individuals are likely to come to the forefront in any political show-down.

18. Several officers are more conspicuous than others, if only by virtue of the positions they occupy. Foremost among these is General Sak Sutsakhan, the army's deputy chief of staff. He apparently is a capable and respected officer, whose personal political ambitions, if any, are unknown. The same is true of General Thappana Nginn, the new interior minister. He predicted just before he was appointed to that office that the government would soon find itself in serious political trouble. He criticized Lon Nol, and was even harsher on Sirik Matak, whom, he claimed, could count on the support of only a third of the military establishment.

19. Other key officers include General U Say and General Nou Tho, who is in command of the Phnom Penh Special Military Region. Tho's position is particularly important because it involves control of a

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large portion of the army, including a number of crack Khmer Krom battalions that probably would figure prominently in any struggle for power. The Khmer Krom are deeply loyal to Lon Nol, but where they would stand if the prime minister left the scene is one of the most important unknowns in the Cambodian situation.

20. There seem to be only a few junior officers who show a political bent. The most noteworthy of these is Lon Nol's younger brother, Lt. Colonel Lon Non, who devotes most of his time to protecting the prime minister's and his own interests, and to denigrating his arch-enemy, Sirik Matak. Recently his heavy-handed and corrupt ways have apparently alienated many of his former associates and supporters, including Khmer Krom officers. Lon Non's political fortunes and future are tied directly to Lon Nol's.

21. Two of Lon Non's erstwhile colleagues, Major Tep Kunnah and Lt. Colonel Les Kosem, are also political activists. Kunnah spends a good deal of his time working among various civilian groups, attempting to interest them in the "Republican Association," a busy pro-government organization that apparently will become a full-fledged political party. Kosem, in addition to serving as deputy commander of the Phnom Penh Special Military Region, is deeply involved in the political affairs of several ethnic minority groups. Neither of them has yet revealed great thirst for political power. Nevertheless, because of their various associations and responsibilities, they almost certainly would play a role in any significant political maneuvering in the future.

Lon Nol

22. In further centralizing power and in dismantling the mechanisms through which an orderly succession of power could be carried out, the regime has been made more dependent than ever on the person of Lon Nol. Last spring, after Lon Nol resigned and then returned to office when no one else could form

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a government, it was demonstrated that no other figure can unite the various factions within, as well as without, the government.

23. Sirik Matak is still the logical candidate to succeed Lon Nol. But he proved unable to form a government in April, and his standing with the military is still not sound. If Matak were to be ruled out, the eager and willing Son Ngoc Thanh probably would be next in line of consideration. Although Thanh might be able to count on important Khmer Krom commanders and some Buddhist elements rallying to his banner, it is unclear what other support he would receive. Thanh might be out of the picture when the dust settles from the current political upheaval. In Tam, who was a prime candidate last spring, has fallen by the wayside. That leaves only some as-yet-unknown military figure as a possible successor.

24. The succession problem would not be of immediate concern except for the fact that Lon Nol's health is a real question mark. [REDACTED]

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